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THE WORK OF A HIGH-SCHOOL VISITOR

I USE the word Visitor rather than Inspector for the representative of a university comes as an invited guest rather than as one having authority. To be sure, he may be curious as other visitors sometimes are. He may observe dust on the educational furniture and may make note of it; but these notes are not made for the purpose of distributing among the neighbors gossip news of shortcomings. In fact, if there are faults and defects, they are seldom reported even to the committee to which the official report is made. The high-school Visitor comes as a guest—possibly not always a welcome one—for occasionally there is a teacher who is as visibly agitated as some housewives are when the minister arrives for dinner on washday. This agitation comes from the fact that they do not know the Visitor. They have not learned that his mission is to help, to suggest, to aid, not to hinder or to find fault. It is in this helpfulness that the real mission of the high-school Visitor lies.

There are many lines in which the high-school Visitor attempts to have this helping influence. He is frequently asked to assist in the revision of the program of studies for the school. The task is not an easy one. The local demand for particular studies must be complied with, or shown to be disproportionate to the relative importance of the subjects demanded. The number and position of studies, the time devoted to each, the balancing of the course, and all the other questions of program-making must be considered primarily from the standpoint of economical and effective school-teaching, while the resulting program should, if possible, be such that the graduate can be admitted to the university if he so desires. Fortunately, the task is rendered easier because the state university admission-requirements have been framed in the belief that what is best for the school is also best for the university. The absolute requirements are such that but few question their desirability for all pupils, while the options

have been arranged with special reference to conditions in this state as determined by a careful inspection of the schools for a number of years past. The superintendent, with his knowledge of local conditions, and the high-school Visitor with his knowledge of general conditions, can by consultation make a better program than either of them would be liable to make alone.

In the matter of additional equipment the high-school Visitor is a potent factor. School boards are often inclined to think that a school can get along another year, even though necessary improvements have been called to their attention by the superintendent. The statement of the Visitor that something should be done gives added weight to the superintendent's suggestion, and brings results. In some cases this has been the adding of a room. In at least two cases the result was an entire new building. It has frequently brought about the equipping of a laboratory, both in the furnishing of a room and in the supplying of apparatus. Libraries not deserving of the name have been materially increased. In fact there is seldom a school in which something is not suggested, and it is rare that the suggestion is not followed. I quote selections from a few of the numerous letters received, showing that these results have followed the Visitor's report:

"I read your letter in board meeting last night. They immediately ordered the purchasing of \$100 worth of apparatus and will soundly favor a like appropriation annually until we are fitted out for accredited work. They also favor extending the school year to thirty-six weeks. We may be able to do that this year; I think we can so manage our program as to reach forty-minute periods throughout. The course will be something very closely following your suggestions for next year."

"I have very much appreciated your visit of a few months ago; I have been looking up the subject of English in our schools, and I am very glad that my attention was called to it in good time. I want to consult you again this spring in regard to some changes in our course of study."

"I inclose report as per your request. We will put into effect at once your suggestions."

"I hope that, if you are in this part of the state during the year, you will make it a point to drop in on us. I believe we shall have things in better shape. I want to thank you for your very great assistance in putting us on

this new footing. Your insistence that we must have another teacher clinched matters, and there never was any discussion after that."

"Many thanks for your letter in regard to apparatus. It had the desired effect. The board made the necessary appropriation and I have already selected and received \$43 worth of material for individual laboratory work. What is yet lacking, I have been instructed to procure by the time school opens in September."

"We have just received one compound microscope, four dissecting microscopes, and the other apparatus specified. We are, therefore, somewhat better equipped for science work than when you were here. I wish to say that your letter assisted me very much indeed. I very much doubt whether this apparatus would otherwise have been purchased."

"By the way, if it is possible for you to write me a letter that would be encouraging for our school board to continue 'in the good work,' I believe it might be instrumental in doing much good. We have had a hard struggle here to secure four years in the high school, to obtain material with which to work, and to secure college graduates for teachers. A few words from you might stiffen up the backbone of some of our board members along this line."

The element of personal help to teachers is not so much in evidence. It is the official business of the high-school Visitor to suggest improvements in the material lines above, but it is not his business to pick flaws in the work of teachers, or to find fault with their individual ways of doing things. In a positive way, however, much help can be and is given to teachers. It is often possible to suggest methods which have not occurred to the teacher. A desirable thing found in one school is carried over the state. Everywhere the teachers are interested in a comparison of methods and results. If a first-year class in Latin has covered but two thirds as many pages as have been covered in each of five other schools using the same text, it is not difficult to show the teacher that the pace is too slow.

In the larger schools this element of personal help is even more prominent than in the smaller ones. In these schools plenty of room and ample equipment is usually provided. The high school is in charge of an experienced and competent principal, thoroughly abreast of modern thought in secondary education. Each line of work is in charge of a teacher especially prepared for it. In such a school there is sharp and eager inquiry in all lines of high-school work. The principal is

anxious to compare his experience with that of other principals who are trying to solve the many problems of high-school administration. The teachers are on the alert for anything of advantage to their respective departments, and a meeting with such teachers cannot fail to be of mutual benefit. In some of these larger schools an effort is made to do work which shall be accepted for advanced credit at the university. In many cases the Visitor has been able to point out changes in amount, method or equipment, which would raise the work to a plane entitling it to consideration for such advanced credit. During the past year this has been done in five schools. Only last week the principal of one of the larger schools of the state said that the chemistry course would be revised and equipped so that such credit could be obtained. In so far as suggestions are reasonable and right, the larger schools have as much interest in following them as do the smaller schools.

The high-school Visitor is often asked to recommend teachers. His knowledge of the wants of a certain school and his large acquaintance with the teaching force of the state enables him to be of good service to the school. If constant practice is of any value he ought to be a good judge of teachers. When interested in the building up of a school or a department, it is a great help to be able to put it in charge of someone who will successfully carry out the work planned. The difficulty has been in the scarcity of thoroughly trained teachers suited to the places vacant. An effort is made to fit the teacher to the place, and for this purpose a full set of records, similar to those of a teachers' agency, is kept for all graduates of the university who desire to teach. By carefully selecting a candidate suited to the place vacant, and by limiting recommendations to the statement that a particular person is qualified to fill a particular place, the evils arising from general recommendations are avoided. In fact, no general recommendations are given.

Nor is the influence of the Visitor limited to the superintendent and the teachers. It is hoped that the pupils derive some benefit other than that which comes from the improved efficiency of the school. To some, at least, the possibility of a

university course is suggested. There is an effort made to set the pupils to thinking about their work in life, to suggest lines of activity, to show them that even if one intends to dig ditches for a living, it is well to prepare for it by a course in civil engineering. The frequent requests of pupils for a conference furnish an opportunity for the giving of advice not all of which will pass unheeded.

Many teachers think that the business of the high-school Visitor is the soliciting of students. If well and tactfully done, his work will not only bring students to the University, but it will also make those pupils stronger because of the increased efficiency of the schools, but this is not the primary object of the visitation. The main object is to help in the building up of a better system of high schools in the state. This improved condition will be of advantage to all colleges and universities alike and the State University will get but a share of the benefit. Schools have been visited three and four years in succession, at a considerable outlay of time and money, although not a single pupil came to the University. On the contrary, many of these send pupils to other institutions, where they are received because of the University stamp of approval on a portion of the work of the school. As one superintendent said: "We never send any pupils to the State University, but we will make all improvements necessary to keep us on the accredited list, because it helps our standing at Normal."

To go into a community which is either opposed to higher education or which is thoroughly apathetic, where the only educational ferment is in the superintendent, and in a visit of a single day to do something or say something which will start that school toward a better condition is not always easy and frequently not possible. But by recognizing what is done and by asking for some one thing which lies within the possibilities of the situation, a start is made. Year by year something is added until much has been accomplished. To judge how much can be done, to point out the most essential things, to insist on as much as lies within the realm of possibility, to suggest lines of further progress—this is the business of the high-school

Visitor, and in this way does he help in the making of a weak school into a strong one. There are schools in Illinois today doing excellent work, much of which is due to the visitations made.

It is perhaps assuming too much to say that the high-school Visitor is the cause of the changes made. He is but one factor. The superintendent, the school board, and the school sentiment of the community must have reached a point where the necessity of a good high school is recognized. It is seldom that the superintendent does not feel that changes are desirable, but in too many cases he is unwilling to shoulder the responsibility. He is afraid to stand for anything or to recommend anything which may possibly be opposed by any member of his school board. The desire to hold the place stands in the way of progress. While some such superintendents do not change places often, neither do they rise in position or salary as rapidly as the progressive, vigorous man who, at the proper time and in the proper way, is not afraid to point out needed changes. The school board must be ready for improvement, or at least must be willing to take the advice of a masterful superintendent, and give him a chance to try something until he can demonstrate its superiority and desirability. The board, however, cannot be far in advance of the people. In some towns the work of years in improving the schools has been overturned at a single election, where the people failed to elect progressive men. The superintendent should be ahead of the board, and the board ahead of the people, but the distance between them must not be great. Educational sentiment among the people of Illinois is moving rapidly forward, and it is because of this that such a large proportion of the work of the high-school Visitor is effective.

The work of the high-school Visitor has its limitations. He lacks authority. He cannot *demand* anything. His only chance for an attentive hearing and for the adoption of his suggestions lies in his ability to show both the feasibility and the desirability of the things for which he asks. This has its advantage in rendering him more careful of what is asked. In most schools it is

far better that the Visitor has no authority. Most superintendents are thoroughly acquainted with their work, and if the suggestions of the Visitor are right they will be carried into effect. Authority to demand might force things upon many schools which would be harmful. The Visitor is human, and therefore frequently wrong, and it is well that his ideas must satisfy the judgment of the local school authorities. On the other hand, there are cases where the right to demand, rather than to suggest, would be of great advantage. Some schools and school boards seem to be under the hypnotic influence of a sleepy superintendent, and although his talk rings loudly of "progress," nothing is done. Or, again, the superintendent may be held back by a board dominated by "the heaviest taxpayer," whose only object in being on the board is to curtail expenses. Fortunately these conditions are rare, but in either case the Visitor has a longing for an authority stronger than that given by the ability to refuse University credit. While the refusing of credit is a stimulus in some schools, in those mentioned it has little effect. The frequent changes of teachers and superintendents hinders the work greatly. Boards fail to realize what harm comes to a good school by bringing in a new man with new ideals which, although as good as those of his predecessor, yet necessitate the uprooting of much that has been done. Unfortunately, a poor superintendent usually moves rapidly from place to place, and ruins every school he enters. I know one man whose track is marked by ruined high schools.

There is also a field of work outside of the schools visited. The office of the high-school Visitor is a sort of an educational clearing house or information bureau. The correspondence is large, often reaching fifty letters per week. Many schools are benefited by receiving "a list of suitable experiments in physics," "a list by years of English classics read," "a list of library books," and similar material. It is through the high-school Visitor that the department of pedagogy comes into most intimate contact with the teaching force of the state, and an attitude of mutual helpfulness is established. The influence of the university upon the school system is great, but to most schools it

is abstract and distant, and the Visitor becomes the concrete personification of this influence—the present, positive element which brings this university influence into activity and effectiveness.

Such is some of the work of the high-school Visitor in Illinois. It is evident that he has some helpful influence on the school system of the state. That he has this influence is due to the recognized position of the state university as the head of the educational interests in the state, and the desire of superintendents and school officers to make it so in fact as well as in name.

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